Young refugees in UK schools

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In short

There is little policy or guidance for teachers working with young asylum-seekers and refugees. They are often grouped together with EAL learners (or 'vulnerable' pupils more generally) but they have specific needs that can be understood and addressed. This article offers preliminary findings from a larger review of the literature, focusing on the key themes of policy, language and belonging.

Introduction

There is a lot that we don't know about the young refugees and asylum-seekers in our schools. They are not treated as a 'discrete group within [the] school curriculum, assessment data, or welfare policy' and their distinct needs are often lost when they are subsumed into broader categories such as 'vulnerable' or EAL learners (McIntyre et al. 2020: 395). There has been no substantive national policy on asylum-seeking and refugee (ASR) children in UK education since 2007, in part because responsibility for their welfare rests with local authorities rather than the Department for Education. This leads to significant variation in provision across the UK (Gladwell & Chetwynd 2018, Pinson & Arnot 2010).

This review shares preliminary findings from a larger study into young asylum-seekers and refugees in UK schools.[1] It is based on a systematic review of the literature and here we report on three of the major themes that emerged: policy, language and belonging.

Policy

There is a 'gap between policy on paper and reality' when it comes to the support offered to young refugees, with substantial variation between different parts of the UK (Vandekerckhove & Aarssen 2020: 108). A consistent finding is that ASR learners face barriers to accessing education, and it is noteworthy that not one 'region of the UK has been able to meet the 20 day target for accessing education for all of the UASC [unaccompanied asylum-seeking children] in their care' (Gladwell & Chetwynd 2018: 8). For all ASR children, the factors delaying their enrolment include ongoing age assessments, mental health difficulties, long waiting lists and the lack of places for children with special educational needs (*ibid.*, Ott & O'Higgins 2019, McIntyre et al. 2018, Madziva & Thondhlana 2017, Walker 2011). For older learners who arrive mid-year, this is compounded by some schools' unwillingness to admit students into upper Secondary for 'fear of negatively influencing results profiles' (Gladwell & Chetwynd 2018: 3).

Once enrolled, ASR students are 'disproportionately affected' by education policies that limit access to full-time education up to the age of 19, and by the 'binary choice' between language support and curriculum access (Morrice et al. 2019a: 400-401). This reflects a widespread lack of awareness of the needs of young refugees and the lack of

[1] The other members of the project team are Charlotte Flothmann and Antonia Lythgoe (both of the University of Bristol). The term ASR (asylum-seeking and refugee) is used to include children seeking refuge regardless of their current legal status.

flexibility in the education system to accommodate learners who need extra time or who would benefit from different types of curriculum (*ibid.*, Gladwell & Chetwynd 2018, Doyle & O'Toole 2013; see also Klenk 2017 on ESOL classes).

Teachers often feel 'ill-equipped to meet the complex needs of children affected by conflict in an often already under-resourced and overstretched sector' (Gladwell & Chatwynd 2018: 43; Madziva & Thondhlana 2017). As well as ensuring the right type of support, schools find it difficult to provide *enough* support, and the hours of specialist tuition vary significantly between settings (Morrice et al. 2019b).

Impact of immigration policy

Immigration policy changes have 'far-reaching effects on the work of teachers and the ways in which schools and students engage with the issue of asylum emotionally, morally and politically' (Arnot et al. 2013: 14)**.** Unaccompanied children, in particular, may not be able to 'access mainstream full-time education because of age disputes and unstable living arrangements' (Ott & O'Higgins 2019: 565). Ongoing age disputes may result in young people having to wait for 'months for disputes to be resolved', delaying 'their personal development and possibility to integrate' (Walker 2011: 215).

Dispersal, detention and deportation are three immigration control procedures that have become the 'normalised way of managing asylum-seekers' (Arnot et al. 2013: 16). In the context of dispersal, the 'educational needs of asylum-seeker children and youth appear to have been repeatedly marginalised or ignored' (Pinson & Arnot 2010: 252). It has been reported that local authorities often receive 'insufficient notice of the arrival of asylum-seekers' and that they had 'no say in the process of dispersal especially with respect to whether there was sufficient educational support for such children' (*ibid.*). As a result,

asylum-seekers and their families are often 'dispersed to areas where there may not [be] any school placement for the children, [where] schools may [have] very little experience of non-white students, those with EAL or new arrivals who appeared at odd times in the school year, [and] where the schools may not [have] adequate resources to meet their educational needs' (*ibid.*).

Access to higher education

Although some progress has been made in improving access to higher education, barriers still exist for ASRs (McKenzie et al. 2019). Some students in further education feel pressure to 'take part in education or training that they did not particularly wish to do' either because it was 'the only thing on offer to them at the time' or because it was 'a means to an end' (Doyle & O'Toole 2013: 22). For instance, one participant 'was told that she would have to complete a literacy and numeracy course to qualify for another course even though she had a degree in finance in her country of origin where she had studied in the English language' (*ibid*.). Furthermore, refugees with 'no recourse to public funds' may have to wait up to ten years to achieve 'home' status and therefore be eligible for student loans (McKenzie et al. 2019).

Policy approaches

At a system level, the UK needs to 'improve on resource allocation' (Madziva & Thohdlana 2017: 954). There are particular challenges in preparing new teachers and supporting current staff, and so policy-makers need to consider what experience teachers will need as the pupil population becomes increasingly diverse. EAL provision will play a key part (see next section) and should be included more prominently in initial teacher education (Ryan et al. 2010), as

should specific training on the needs of asylum-seeking and refugee learners (Gladwell & Chetwynd 2018). Programme monitoring and evaluation is also inconsistent and should be improved (Phillimore 2011, Ryan et al. 2010). Without good monitoring data, note Ott & O'Higgins (2019: 567), it is 'impossible to understand the educational outcomes' and the 'effectiveness of different educational services' for this population.

Language

Learning the majority language is fundamental to ASR children's inclusion, academic progress, engagement with mainstream lessons and deeper interactions with other pupils (Peterson et al. 2017, Madziva & Thondhlana 2017, Ryan et al. 2010; similarly Phillimore 2011 for ESOL). However, the 'absence of asylum seeking and refugee children in English education policy' (McIntyre et al. 2020: 396) acts as a significant constraint, encouraging schools to treat ASR children no differently from others and thereby making their specific needs less visible.

ASR learners are often subsumed into the broader EAL category, and this has both positive and negative effects. It helps to focus support on their language needs, but it risks minimising the different experiences of learners who have fled their homes and who have precarious legal status here. In practice, ASR students often have difficulty accessing the full curriculum because schools focus 'primarily on supporting proficiency in English through targeted EAL support' (McIntyre et al. 2020: 398). Requiring ASR learners to develop English proficiency *before* accessing the mainstream curriculum results in a narrower curriculum that is less focused on their specific needs (as it does for EAL pupils). For older learners, ESOL classes in local colleges are often an alternative, and here English is similarly 'perceived as fundamental for feelings of integration' (Court 2017: 412), but there are often long waiting lists to access ESOL provision (Gladwell & Chetwynd 2018).

Teaching approaches

EAL specialists will be familiar with the range of methods for teaching multilingual pupils. For ASR learners in particular, it is important to be mindful of how prior experience can affect

learning. Refugee and asylum-seeker learners will experience school differently from other pupils, including other EAL pupils. The literature notes the importance of supportive adults (Madziva & Thondhlana 2017, Hastings 2012), peer buddies (Manzoni & Rolfe 2019) and a flexible, personalised approach to the curriculum (Gladwell & Chetwynd 2018). One study discussed the characteristics of a 'teacher-helper' and found that consistency; reliability; personal investment in relationships; and genuine care and interest in the young person were particularly important (Hastings 2012). We might imagine that similar characteristics would mark out peer buddies – see the Young Interpreters Scheme for an excellent example of this.[2]

[2] https://www.hants.gov.uk/educationandlearning/emtas/supportinglanguages/young-interpreters-guide

Belonging

In the study from which this review is taken, we found that 'belonging' captured a number of related themes: from culture and identity to the learners' psychosocial needs and their experiences of racism and prejudice. As soon as they arrive in the country, young ASRs must deal with a range of practical challenges, socioeconomic disadvantage, and the barriers to accessing education that result from immigration policy (Ott & O'Higgins 2019, Gateley 2015, Ryan et al. 2010). Isolation can be a significant factor, especially where the local population does not go out of its way to be welcoming and where the newly arrived pupil has limited proficiency in English (McBride et al. 2018, Court 2017, Gateley 2015).

Students may also struggle to adjust to a new education system (McBride et al. 2018, Ryan et al. 2010). This works both ways: learners can find the expectations of the school and the curriculum opaque, but equally schools struggle where 'pupils have very little English but are also unfamiliar with the teaching, learning and cultural aspects of school life' (Manzoni & Rolfe 2019: 61). The different trajectories that ASR learners have followed, and continue to follow, are also significant. For some time after their arrival in school, they are likely to be negotiating the legal system to secure their right to stay in the country (Bloch & Hirsch 2017). This affects the school's relationship with families because it 'complicated their assessments of children, disrupting standardised, official procedures and creating different challenges as the children settled into school' (Oliver & Singal 2017: 1222).

Fostering belonging

It is crucial for teachers and school leaders to be 'positive about the contribution that migrant pupils and their families make to the life of their schools' (Manzoni & Rolfe 2019:

61). Just being known by a member of staff in school can help young ASRs 'begin to develop a sense of belonging in the UK' (Hastings 2012: 343). There were also positive outcomes when school staff have facilitated activities to support intercultural experiences and dialogue between pupils (Peterson et al. 2017). Education is valued by ASR students for providing 'enjoyment, solace, building confidence, having intrinsic value in and of itself' (Gateley 2015) and classroom has been described as a place that 'fostered feelings of belonging, acceptance and being integrated' (Court 2017).

However, Arnot et al. (2013 citing Yuval-Davis et al. 2005) warn against a politics of belonging 'based on economic rather than humanitarian principles' that would lead to '"cherry picking" of refugees based on their alleged work skills and potential of integration rather than their real need of protection.' These authors note that there is an increasing 'denial of the rights of economic and social well-being, health, and protection to "non-citizens"' (p. 25). While adopting a strong caring ethos and child-centred approaches may appear beneficial, they also 'might fail to recognise (and hence depoliticise) [learners'] very real experiences of government, forced migration and settlement, of surviving loss, death, and destitution' (Arnot et al. 2013: 26).

Concluding comments

This review has given a short summary of the literature relating to young asylum-seekers and refugees in UK schools, based on preliminary findings from a systematic review of the research literature. We focused on three themes: the policy context, the importance of learning the majority language and the crucial need to feel a sense of belonging. What comes through consistently is the troubling disregard for ASR learners: our education system has

little to say about the most vulnerable of our community. This stands in contrast to the efforts of school staff, who take on responsibility for these learners that far exceeds their formal role.

Much of this responsibility falls to the EAL specialist, although language is only one part of the equation and effective responses will necessarily involve the whole school – just as they do for EAL more generally. This is both a challenge and an opportunity: it requires us to develop new skills and a more precise understanding of the needs of ASR learners, but allows us to use our existing expertise to help children who seek refuge among us.

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